VACHEL LINDSAY: A STUDY IN RETREAT AND REPUDIATION

BY

GEORGE SCOUFFAS

A.B., Bates College, 1937
A.M., University of Illinois, 1938

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
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In January, 1913, the recently founded *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* gave the favored first pages of its issue to the poem "General William Booth Enters into Heaven." A little more than a year later, Harriet Monroe invited its creator Nicholas Vachel Lindsay to *Poetry's* banquet in honor of William Butler Yeats. Responding in typical high-spirited fashion, Lindsay announced he would read his new poem "The Congo" as his share of the entertainment. Lindsay did recite "The Congo," and, as Harriet Monroe describes it in *A Poet's Life*, the performance was received "with an accolade. . . of authoritative praise." In the same year appeared the *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*, describing Lindsay's walking trip westward from Springfield, Illinois, to New Mexico in 1912 and containing the poem "The Kallyope Yell." Two poems "to be chanted" again led an issue of *Poetry* in July, 1914: "The Firemen's Ball" and "The Santa Fé Trail." And in February, 1915, appeared "The Chinese Nightingale."

Beginning with 1912, then, Lindsay's life was violently altered. The recitation technique he exhibited for Yeats was too exciting and novel to remain by the fireside, or in private banquets. People to whom poetry was synonymous with effeminacy or impracticality gathered to hear the new poet-phenomenon.Extensive tours were arranged to present Lindsay to a national audience that he himself later estimated finally included a million people, an astounding and unprecedented response to poetry. From 1913 to 1923 Lindsay books were published at an average of one a year: *General William Booth*, 1913; *The Congo*, 1914; *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*, 1914; *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 1915; *A Handy Guide for Beggars*, 1916; *The Chinese Nightingale*, 1917; *The Golden Whales of California*, 1920; *The Golden Book of Springfield*, 1920; *Collected Poems*, 1923; *Going-to-the-Sun*, 1923. Yeats, already firmly established as a poet in

1914, began his speech at the famous *Poetry* banquet by addressing himself "especially to a fellow craftsman" — Lindsay. In 1920 England received Lindsay and his chant with approbation and genuine enjoyment, though scarcely with understanding. Walter Raleigh introduced him at Oxford, Masefield praised him as a fellow-chanter, and Robert Nichols wrote a preface for the *General William Booth* volume published in England.

Yet, in his 1925 preface to the *Collected Poems* Lindsay said, "I want to be judged, not by my speaking tours, but by what I did before October, 1912. . . " The entire preface, written with a passionate regret and a nostalgic yearning that are reflected in the chaos of its prose and logic, expressed a desire for reversion to an earlier state. Most of his letters, especially from about 1918 on, carry within them a rising revolt against his way of life. This revolt, apparently based on a feeling of engulfment by the complexity of existence, eventually led to his own repudiation of his best known work and a corresponding longing for a return to the past.

There is little doubt that the year 1912 became symbolic to Lindsay. It was the year of demarcation and cleavage. It was the point at which one form of existence was forsaken for another, infinitely more complex, more demanding and capricious. On one side of the temporal line was a nonentity, a town eccentric; on the other the nonentity became socially recognized, nationally and even internationally known. Ironically, however, Lindsay looked on 1912 as a fatal year; he did not seem to be sure whether it represented an entrance into or an exit from life, and in his most despairing moments it became the latter.

Lindsay's reaction to the life that began in 1912 led to a rejection not only of the poetry that brought him his recognition but also of himself as poet, and ultimately led to his suicide. The typical view of this reaction is that Lindsay was overwhelmed by a crass American society insensitive to beauty and to the proper worth of its poets. This explanation con-

tains a substantial truth but it is too easily prejudiced by an uncritical desire to magnify the man at the expense of his society. The chief result of such magnification is that it prevents a true estimate of the man and his work. This study was undertaken with the belief that a complete understanding of the "tragedy" of Lindsay can come only from an exposure of motives, artistic and personal. Only through such an approach can his responsibility as man and artist be gauged. Thus the general method of research inevitably demanded first a close inspection of the conflicts Lindsay faced in developing his adjustment to his society. This could be accomplished only through a careful reading of his letters, his notebook-diaries, and all available personal notes. Lindsay's reactions to these conflicts then had to be translated into motives and traced in their various transformations through his poetry and prose to establish the relation of the man to his work. To focus the study, the obvious fundamental question was posed: Why did Lindsay split his life into two distinct periods, the earlier desirable and "good," the later "evil"? More specifically, since Lindsay magnified the year 1912, it was necessary to know exactly what transpired about that time, in terms of both his poetry and his motivation; then to relate the period to the earlier life of Lindsay to uncover the causal pattern; and finally to use this pattern in the interpretation of Lindsay's reaction to 1912.

The results of the study soon showed that the life and thinking of the younger Lindsay not only forecast such a year as 1912, but also made inevitable his turning against what it eventually represented. The year 1912 introduced a new poetic technique, the "Higher Vaudeville." Briefly, this technique is characterized by a basic emphasis on the development of the oral and musical potentialities of poetry through the exaggeration of tone-color, both emotional and imitative, but especially the latter, and through the establishment of completely overt, elemental rhythms. Lindsay's early interest in such poets as Tennyson, Swinburne, and Poe naturally prepared him for the heightening of assonant and alliterative

effects and for the increase in the use of the refrain, repetend, and echolalia. For his rhythms, however, Lindsay turned to his complex society, including his own religious background: to its hymns, ballads, and popular music, particularly the syncopated variety, and to rhythms more organic to it, rhythms of its machines especially.

In the development of the Higher Vaudeville, however, Lindsay was prompted by more than artistic considerations, for it was the culmination of Lindsay's desire to escape the categorically "moral" limitations of his personal life. It represented his determination to participate in the larger experience of his society. Yet despite this determination Lindsay retained a deep fear of experience. To modify this fear it was necessary for him to modify his society. Thus he attempted to utilize the Higher Vaudeville as an instrument of reform. The ambiguity of his motivation was transferred to his poetry, which had to operate as a religio-aesthetic force purifying a democratic society. From the beginning of the Higher Vaudeville Lindsay betrayed his underlying fear in the uncertain relationship he had to his new poetic method: he was self-conscious about the method itself, though in contradiction was his obvious delight in using it; he was worried about the public's conception of him, afraid they would not understand what he was and what he represented; and he was concerned about the change in himself and his relation to his past. This uncertainty soon revealed itself more specifically in Lindsay's emphasis on the ironic intent in the Higher Vaudeville and on its orthodoxy, an emphasis supported by dubious logic. At the same time he attempted to fulfill his stated intention of assimilating it into the total pattern of his work. However, since his attitude toward it was an ambivalent one, his process of assimilation was correspondingly contradictory. On one hand, he grafted the technical vigor of the Higher Vaudeville to poems of his specific social vision, both old and current; on the other, he fought it in poetry and prose as a symbol of evil materialism. Often the two motives operated simultaneously as illustrated by his work on the

motion picture, and his development of the poem-games.

As his uncertainty and disillusionment deepened, Lindsay increasingly revealed the strain in his position by focussing on jazz as one of the principal sources of his difficulties and settling into open warfare against it and the public's conception of him as an interpreter of jazz. It is obvious that Lindsay himself forced jazz to assume its satanic role. His attitude toward the term can readily be translated into psychological motives that governed Lindsay from the start and that were progressively aggravated as time passed. Jazz was a concrete confirmation of distrust and fears. It became the mask of his arch-opponent, the force in life that needed redemption and not only refused it at his hands but also insidiously allied itself with him. To Lindsay this signified his own defeat. What made this defeat most intolerable to him was his realization that it was self-inflicted. There was a "noisy" self within him that fought against inhibition and that yearned for expression and the company of his fellow man. But there was also another self that was an ally of the inhibition he fought and that severely subjected the former to moral scrutiny. This other self controlled all his basic aspirations and saw Lindsay the reciter-entertainer in the degrading role of the clown. It could be satisfied only with a mythical portrait of Lindsay that it was beyond his power to create.

In 1923 Lindsay's distress culminated in actual breakdown, both physical and apparently mental. The deaths of his parents, particularly that of his mother in 1922, undoubtedly contributed much to his collapse, thus dramatizing his complete dependence on mother and family. Lindsay's occasional revelations of his relationship to his mother indicate his eventual awareness of the cause of many of his personal conflicts. Despite this awareness during this period Lindsay increasingly magnified the worth of his ancestral background in an effort to compensate for the humiliations, actual and imagined, that he suffered. Together with this came a violent reassertion of self through a defiance and a rebelliousness that

were often childish. All signs, however, pointed toward a wholesale, though rationalized, withdrawal from the society he had hoped to assimilate and reform. Engulfed by the immensity of his task, he attempted to return to the simple life before 1912. He re-read and re-appraised his earlier works; he turned again to drawing, his early love; he longed for hiking-tours like those of 1907 and 1912; and he was more than ever concerned with youth and innocence. Now he assumed the role of silent observer of humanity, detached and uninvolved, thus rejecting the public poet and the "orator."

Part III of this study exposes in detail, with particular focus on the poetry, the basic duality in Lindsay that not only explains more fully the Higher Vaudeville, but, more important, the role it played in the total pattern of Lindsay's struggle for personal integration and self-fulfillment. A reconstruction of the two worlds that Lindsay attempted to unite further clarifies the conflict between Lindsay the poet and Lindsay the reformer, and also reveals the completeness of Lindsay's retreat by describing the self-created pre-1912 world he yearned to re-enter. Lindsay's reaction to his society was either "mean" (in the sense of "abased") or "virile," the virile clearly compensation for the mean, and the mean a refuge from the virile. At odds with strong elements in society that corresponded to his personal needs for fulfillment and that were antagonistic to his artistic aspirations, Lindsay saw himself as a lonely, misunderstood fugitive dependent on forces other than material for support. This self demanded a fostering of the mean, a dependence on renunciation and asceticism, a yearning for adoration and ritual, and an identification with the little, the fragile, the weak, the subjugated and frustrated. It found its justification in poetry and in the pursuit of religious beauty, to which it attributed powers far transcending those of materiality. But this self could not succeed in making its world thoroughly self-sufficient or sovereign. It felt too strongly the validity of the counter-claims of physical nature. The response to these virile claims, however, needed constant purification to fit the standards set

up by the mean. Lindsay in the role of purifier was Lindsay the reformer. His most difficult and anguished moments were always those in which the opposing demands of the mean and the virile met head-on. He never achieved a balance between the two. Yet, it must be noted that not even these extremes were genuine, but poetic or psychological inventions. Sincerity of yearning and striving notwithstanding, the ascetic, the mystic, the wizard, all mean, were masks; as were the leader, the thinker in a real world, the politician, the pioneer, the physical hero, and the lover, all virile. Consummated mysticism, on the one hand, or a true perception of reality, on the other, would have meant salvation. As it was, Lindsay always felt he had a third choice — escape, impossible short of extinction. Most important, all of his conflicts swung in an orbit about a central pivot that always remained mean.

There is no doubt that Lindsay's mean conception of self resulted in large part from a self-consciousness that hardened into a sense of guilt and put the poet on the defensive all his life. His paternal grandfather, a proud Southerner embittered by the losses he suffered in the Civil War, openly showed his contempt for a boy grandchild with curls and even forced Lindsay's mother to cut the boy's hair, though she let it grow again in time to have Lindsay play the part of curly-headed Cupid in one of her "Colloquies." The maternal grandfather took the same attitude toward poets. Undoubtedly Lindsay's bearded father, with his record of meeting disaster squarely and of fulfilling his difficult profession of country doctor, contributed very strongly to the initial feeling of self-consciousness, inevitably "effeminizing" Lindsay's concern for the arts, and symbolizing the opposition of "manliness" to "culture." Finally, to all this must be added a background of Puritanic Protestantism that refused to countenance any literature or art that might be construed as "evil," or any flouting of convention, religious or social — a force Lindsay unsuccessfully fought.

The "mean" took many forms in Lindsay's poetry. Although in its sublimation it appeared in the persons of Lucifer,

St. Francis, and Johnny Appleseed, more often it utilized beggars, tramps, clown-jesters, scarecrows, and lonely children. These mean figures, usually isolated, consorted with denizens of a "little" or submerged world generally recruited from three sources: from actual nature (small beasts, birds, insects, flowers, and plants); from a mythical nature, much of it of Lindsay's own invention (fairies, dryads, gnomes, and miscellaneous animals and flowers); from human society (depressed, underprivileged, persecuted, and otherwise shabby humanity). Most of Lindsay's poems betray the presence of the world of the mean. Beggars, tramps, and paupers appear sometimes in single brief images, sometimes as basic contrast-foils (cf. "The Santa Fé Trail"), and sometimes as spokesmen for entire pieces like "The Beggar Speaks" and "The Tramp's Refusal." Similarly scores of his poems are controlled by his "little" imagery.

The significance of the analysis of Lindsay's world of the mean is twofold. It affords an intimate knowledge of the basis of the relationship between the personal Lindsay and his society and thus clarifies personal motives. It serves to establish a more specific interpretive understanding of the relation of the poetic Lindsay to his work and thus ultimately an understanding of poetic motives. Moreover, there is no doubt that a thorough interpretation of Lindsay's social program must include his identification of Springfield with his personal world of the mean. A full understanding of the relation between the mean and the virile is impossible without a consideration of a counter force imbedded in many of Lindsay's poems that expose their creator in his "meanest" state. This force, that may be called the "strength of the mean," is compounded of aesthetic power and religious fervor. It represents the obsessive monomania in Lindsay, exhibited in a messianic timetable, that directly and indirectly controlled his motives throughout his life. When Lindsay made his decision to participate in his society as leader (to assume the virile), it was this force he attempted to utilize. In his quest for virile power he was naturally attracted to recognized virile leaders,

to Mohammed, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, John Brown, Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, and significantly, his father. It was inevitable, also, that he become increasingly concerned with politics. Many of Lindsay's best known poems represent various aspects of the clash between his worlds of the mean and the virile, with "Doctor Mohawk" revealing a candid statement of the relation between the two.

In conclusion, the world of the mean was Lindsay's self-created world of art (cf. his calling it Olympus). It was an integrated world literal within itself but not in relation to reality. Its ruler was the wizard-magician working with beauty, the super-natural, the non-rational and intuitive. The world of the virile was the world of reality and rationalism, dominated by the conqueror, the politician, and the scientist. In his desire to modify or "purify" the world of reality, Lindsay attempted to transfer the religio-aesthetic power of the mean to the virile. The active agent in this transfer was the prophet-reformer, with the Higher Vaudeville itself representing the most important vehicle. Lindsay's difficulties were aggravated by the results. First, the poet-wizard was definitely relegated to a secondary position, below the prophet, though above the scientist and politician (cf. *The Art of the Moving Picture*). Art, moral only in the broadest possible definition of morality, thus became specifically programmatic and doctrinaire, for the reformer must always work with literal, specific detail. Though a source for good, the poet became simply an instrument pitted against the politician as an instrument of evil. The entire burden was thus placed on the prophet, who must reconcile the two. It was he who needed to understand fully both the good and the evil if he were to succeed. Lindsay, with all sincere intentions granted, understood neither his world of the mean nor the world of the virile, conceiving of the first as a world of escape (the "little room"), the second as the world to escape from (jazz, etc.), though he was instinctively conscious of the high legitimate values of both. It is this consciousness that explains the paradox of Lindsay's desire to repudiate his life both as poet and as re-

former: as poet because society inevitably accepted his poetry only as entertainment (thus making him more sensitive than ever to his loss of poetic integrity); as reformer because society refused to go beyond the instrumentality of his poetry to consider the validity of his reformer's program. In other words, the society he inherently feared as evil refused to be redeemed. The Higher Vaudeville bore the brunt of the repudiation because it represented Lindsay's supreme effort to fulfill his role as prophet. This effort failed and Lindsay knew it. More basically important to Lindsay, this failure signified also the failure of his search for integration. He knew he was back where he began.

VITA

George Scouffas was born March 4, 1915, in Haverhill, Massachusetts, son of Telemachus and Melpomene Scouffas. He graduated from Central High School in Manchester, New Hampshire, in 1932, received the Bachelor of Arts degree from Bates College in 1937, and the Master of Arts degree from the University of Illinois in 1938. Since that time he has been a member of the English Department of the University of Illinois. He has served on the editorial staff of *Accent* since 1947. In 1938 he married Roberta Jones, and they have two daughters, Penelope Carol, 1943, and Judith Anthea, 1946.